IDEAL HOMES / ARTIFICIAL HORIZONS

NEW WORK BY RUPERT GRIFFITHS
MUSEUM OF DOMESTIC DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE
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Introduction by Luke White

Since the Summer of 2006, Rupert Griffiths has been artist in residence in the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture. He started by exploring their archives and collections, which constitute a fascinating document – in images, books, magazines and journals, in samples of original materials and designs, in town planning guidelines and architects' specification books, and in photographs of real homes, amongst other things – of the development of the domestic interior from the nineteenth century to the present day. From Griffiths's research emerged a concern with the relations, as they developed over this period, between both popular and professional discourses on the design of the interior, the built materiality of the interiors themselves, and the lived social experience of these spaces. In response to his encounter with this archive, he has produced an installation which explores the experience and the construction of a sense of 'self' and individual identity within interior space.

Over the last two centuries, the home has been an increasingly important place for the negotiation of identity and selfhood. Since the industrial revolution, when (at the very moment of mass urbanisation where the lower classes, increasingly deprived of their traditional means of rural subsistence, were crowding into the city) the new rising class of the 'bourgeoisie' moved *en masse* to the suburbs, family and work have been separated decisively and absolutely from each other. The 'private' realm of the home came to serve as a sanctuary for all that seemed threatened by the 'public' realm of business, politics and industry which the bourgeoisie had created, with its impersonal, rational, and often ruthless calculation of profit and loss. In contrast to this public realm, the 'privacy' of the family home became the preserve of the personal, and the 'authentic' moral, emotional and spiritual core of the individual, of the refuge of everything irrational, 'human' and intimate.

In this context, the space of the home, dividing 'interior' (private) from 'exterior' (public), became a powerful metaphor (as well as a refuge) for the self in the individualist and competitive society of the modern world. The mind had, since at least the seventeenth century, been discussed as being like the *camera obscura*, which was an optical device, the ancestor of the photographic camera, that consisted of a darkened box with a small aperture or lens in the front, which would cause the image of the outside world to be projected on the back wall of the box. The term *camera obscura* literally means simply 'dark room'. As a coinage, it marks the extent to which being a self was imagined and experienced through metaphors of interior and exterior architectural space. In this context, the physical space of a home – as such a *camera* – could be experienced as a sort of 'external' substitute for the 'internal world' of the self. Experienced as such, it became a screen for the projection of that interiority outwards into the world of objects, a carefully preserved zone of reverie, a place for the expression of feeling and fantasy. The soft, tactile, intimate materials of the nineteenth century home (velvet, plush, silk), its rich ornamentation and patterning, its darkness (literally a '*camera obscura*') all added up to reinforce a sense of intimacy and to compound the distinction between the private world of the home and the public world outside it. The great *Kulturkritik* Walter Benjamin compared the nineteenth-century bourgeois home to a sort of padded instrument case for the individual, which would preserve and protect him or her from external influences. Another popular metaphor of the nineteenth century imagined the proper relation between an individual (or family) and their home as being like that which exists between a mollusc and its shell, highlighting the intimate and mutually forming relation between the two: the shell is at once the natural product of the growth and form of the soft creature inside it; but it is also a hard and 'external' shape which provides the mollusc with its very form and structure. The home, too, is both shaped by the individual, but also a force shaping his or her character.

Walter Benjamin also emphasises the way that the interior became increasingly a place for the play of *surfaces*. Increasingly made of 'pasteboard,' a sort of unreal stage scenery, the domestic interior, just like the 'interior' world of dreams, became a kind of screen, like the back of a *camera obscura*, on which a procession of phantasies was projected: a 'phantasmagoria' show of the oriental, exotic, erotic, biomorphic, gothic and ornamental. This was accelerated by mass-production and mass-reproducibility. An increasingly differentiated product-range for the home was ever-more cheaply available on the market, shown off at exhibitions and advertised in the press.

I have hoped, in this historical excursion back to the inaugural moment of the modern domestic interior, to have raised a few of the issues which are at play in Rupert Griffiths's installation at MoDA. Here, too, the recognition of oneself in relation to the space around one, its surfaces, and its materials, is central to the experience of the work. In particular, the black but perfectly mirrored surface of the wall, dividing the room exactly in half, gives a viewer a physical jolt, an uncanny sense both of being there and also not being there, a strange feeling of disembodiment, a dislocation as to what part of the room we 'feel' ourselves to be within. The experience of the installation poses a series of questions about surface and its antonyms: space, structure and depth. It also raises questions about how our perception of our embodied selves is tied in with our awareness of the physical world around us, and how this is altered as we construct this world differently. It serves as a moment for reflection about how the social coding of identity also relies on our bodily self-recognition within such spaces, loaded as they are with familiar cultural signifiers, and about the capture of these processes of self-recognition within programmes of social engineering, and consumption.

As with our everyday practices of interior decoration, the concept of "surface" seems the particular key to the installation. A surface sits between an inside and an outside, an interior and an exterior. It has an ambiguous role mediating between the two. Is a surface something that hides or reveals the interior depths beneath it? Are surfaces 'superficial' and deceptive appearances, or are they, as (sur)faces, the 'expression' of what lies 'beneath'? Does a surface separate inside from outside, or does it provide a sort of permeable interface which marks the passage from one zone to the other?

If the surfaces and spaces of our daily existence do provide us with something like a shell, forming us just as we form it, separating and protecting our private internal universe from the exterior world; or if these spaces and surfaces serve as a mirror in which we recognise ourselves, or as a screen onto which we project ourselves; and if the walls of our homes are an ambiguous and permeable inter-face mediating between 'inside' and 'outside', 'self' and 'other', then perhaps the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his idea of a 'flesh of the world' with which we clothe ourselves, and through the mediation of which we come to perceive our own embodied existence, would be helpful in understanding what this piece of work prompts us to experience and think about.

There are references in Griffiths's installation to the nineteenth-century past to which I have alluded earlier in this piece of writing – for example in the echoes of the decorative floral patterns of William Morris and the Victorian 'Arts and Crafts' movement to be found in the patterning in Griffiths's ceiling. But in his careful choice of materials there is also an altogether more contemporary attempt to rework the problem and experience of the self amongst the surfaces of the domestic interior. By the 1930s, when Walter Benjamin was writing about the nineteenth-century home, he could already note that, in the minimal, hygienic, light and airy but impersonal modernist styles of living that were taking over, the age of intimate 'dwelling', in which the dark bourgeois interior had really been like a mollusc-shell for the individual, were over. The modern interior is often drained of the rich allusions of the nineteenth-century home to history, memory, place and nature; it is less a space of

'belonging' than its nineteenth-century predecessor. Its materials are also less tactile, human, or organic: the twentieth century has been the age of plastics, flat-pack furniture, polystyrene tiles, modular 'system build' architecture, cladding, MDF and chipboard, veneers and laminates. The texture of the home has increasingly become continuous with that of the altogether less homely office and retail spaces, architectures and forms of design that also haunt this sculpture. In the home, as Jean Baudrillard pointed out in the 1960s, colours, materials and forms have been increasingly artificial, in order to be all the more a matter of consumer choices between objects increasingly uprooted from reference to anything but the self-referential 'system' of differences between them. All of which begs another question: what is it to find one's identity, desire and sense of selfhood through our relation to these impersonal, artificial surfaces of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Is the self itself a less intimate and interior thing? What is it to compose one's individuality, identikit-style, through mass-produced and standardised units? Baudrillard himself was worried, above all, that thrown into a self-referential, abstract 'system of objects' we would be all the more prone to being 'fitted' by those that designed these systems (whether for the goals of social engineering or simply for the profit brought about by the stimulation of perpetual consumption) into the pre-ordained slots of a 'system of consumers'. Within this consumer society, another set of surfaces we may need to introduce in trying to understand our relation to the late twentieth-century home are the screens of the media, of advertising, and of television which now so thoroughly mediate our relations with the things we buy and the spaces in which we live, the very generic nature of these products seeming to turn them more effectively into screens for the projection of the fantasies and images with the meanings of which they become overlaid.

The real surfaces of the home have become increasingly entwined, then, with the electronic surfaces of the media and information technology industries – with those superlatively contemporary surfaces, the *screen* and the *interface*. Not only are homes represented on our screens, but the screen finds its way into the heart of the home itself. They open us up to distant telepresence and to the 'depths' of representation in a way which on the one hand seems to extend the phantasmagorical '*camera obscura*' logic that I have discussed above as already at work in the nineteenth-century home (and which suggests, with hindsight, that at some level, the home has always been a kind of a screen and an interface). But the representational logic of screens and interfaces also, according to some pessimistic commentators, threatens to dissolve the world into a kaleidoscope or maze of fragmentary, impenetrable, depthless surfaces and appearances. What happens to our sense of embodied selfhood, to our 'dwelling' in this age of virtuality? In the 1980s, it became something of a commonplace in cultural theory to understand there having been a late-twentieth-century 'turn', which involved our relation to the world and the constitution of our identities in a 'loss of depth' and a new 'attachment to surfaces'. Rupert Griffiths's installation, as well as the history I have been telling here, suggests both that the attachment of self to surface has a longer history than this, and also that any such attachment to surface necessarily still involves a complex relation to the 'depth' of an elsewhere. The 'attachment to surface' still raises a series of problems of space: of the distinction between an 'inside' and an 'outside', of the relations between the fantastical productions of an 'inner world' and the elusive distant realm of the exotic and never-seen. 'Surface' still mediates, confounds, folds in on itself – and yet also causes to be – the distinction between interior and exterior, and all the pairs of terms that line up alongside this one. The built interior in general and the home in particular continue to offer us a model 'container' which stands in, in our imagination, for that which we imagine ourselves to be as embodied subjectivities, and its 'surfaces' in particular serve to project these questions of space into the way we imagine our embodied subjectivity. The last two hundred and fifty years can be thought of as one long era in which these questions of what it is to live as a self in a world of surfaces has been an ever-more pressing one. The home has been a primary site for the enmeshment of the self with such surfaces, and in which identity and selfhood can be worked out in such terms. There might, then, be such a thing as a history of surfaces, and MoDA's archive would not be such a bad place to start to look for it…

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An unabridged text with notes is available at www.rupertgriffiths.com